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# Cuban Crisis Mishandled, Insiders and Outsiders Agree

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As Sen. Richard Stone (D-Fla.) arrived at the ornate Senate Caucus Room for a Foreign Relations Committee hearing at 10 a.m. last July 17, a senatorial aide pulled him aside to impart a fascinating tip.

"I've been picking up reports on a recent buildup of Soviet combat troops in Cuba, perhaps as much as a brigade," said the aide, whom Stone will not identify.

In response to the expected question, the aide announced, as Stone recalled it, that the information did not come from a classified official paper, and therefore "you don't have a classification problem" about sounding a public alarm.

In the course of the hearing, supposedly addressed to the strategic arms limitation treaty (SALT II) on nuclear weapons, Stone pointedly inquired of the witnesses, retired members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, about the impact of the hypothetical Soviet introduction of "as much as a brigade of combat troops in Cuba.

The press corps perked up at this new element in the dull SALT story. Off the record and off camera, Stone also had a private exchange that morning with John Carbaugh, a staff aide to anti-SALT Sen. Jesse A. Helms (R-N.C.).

Carbaugh had heard reports of his own about a Soviet combat force in Cuba. Within a few hours, Carbaugh passed his tip along to ABC Television, which began an independent investigation.

These small transactions in mid-July ballooned into a large-scale national and international controversy late in August, leading to a diplomatic confrontation with the Soviets in September and President Carter's televised address about Soviet troops in Cuba on Oct. 1.

Whatever the view of the importance or unimportance of the Soviet "brigade," whether insiders or outsiders to the Carter administration, whether Carter friend or Carter foe, nearly all those familiar with the details of this latest Cuban crisis agree that it was badly mishandled.

Accidents, miscalculations and, much more appalling to old hands, the seeming lack of any sophisticated calculation, contributed to the result, which was described by a British newspaper as "a self-inflicted technical knockout."

Among the other contributing elements:

- An administration still divided at the top on Soviet policy after 2½ years in office, even as the pending SALT II generates a national debate about the nature and intentions of the Russians.

- The present Washington fishbowl in which official secrets quickly leak or are leaked by contending factions, forcing premature announcements and decisions.

- Members of Congress and congressional aides who possess the knowledge, power, maneuver skills and, increasingly, the inclination to do their own thing in U.S. diplomatic and military affairs.

- The inherent ambiguity of the intelligence and misleading character of the term, "Soviet combat brigade," which created a widespread and erroneous impression that something fundamentally new and threatening had been found.

The results of all this—to create vast public concern and confusion, to endanger the strategic arms treaty, to jeopardize U.S.-Soviet relations—did not emerge overnight. They developed step by step since Stone brought the issue to light on July 17.

Soviet troops in Cuba and U.S. intelligence awareness of them go back many years, but a July 12 report by the highly secret National Security Agency marked the beginning of a new and troublesome phase.

The NSA report suggested that a Soviet brigade organization, separate from known military advisers or training elements, had been present in Cuba for several years.

Although there was no firm conclusion and no reference to the word "combat," the report touched off alarm bells in high places and led to a new increase in U.S. surveillance of Cuba.

Only five days later Stone had his tip. After attracting the interest of the media at the morning hearing on July 17, the Florida senator took his inquiry to a closed-door Foreign Relations Committee hearing with top Pentagon and intelligence officials which, by coincidence, had been scheduled for that afternoon.

Defense Secretary Harold Brown and the chiefs of U.S. intelligence agencies gave "an equivocal answer but not a flat denial," according to Stone, and then told a secret impromptu hearing of the NSA findings up to that point. Stone made it clear he would take his suspicions, but not the details of the briefing, to television cameras waiting for him outside.

The committee leadership, concerned about the potentially explosive controversy, asked for and obtained a

public statement drafted by Brown and the intelligence chiefs on the spot to put the matter in perspective.

The statement issued in the names of Chairman Frank Church (D-Idaho) and the senior Republican, Sen. Jacob Javits (N.Y.), said there was "no evidence of any substantial increase" in Soviet military presence in Cuba over several years. It also said "our intelligence does not warrant the conclusion" that any "significant" Soviet forces, other than the long-known military advisory group, was present in Cuba.

The statement gave no hint of the intense internal study and debate on the issue, which only two days later, on July 19, produced a secret CIA finding that a brigade headquarters or structure, at least, was in Cuba separate from an advisory group.

The basis for this finding was simple and persuasive: Soviet officers and men had been overheard repeatedly to refer to a brigade headquarters, or "brigada." There was no agreement in this compromise finding, negotiated by CIA Director Stansfield Turner, on the organization, personnel strength or mission of the shadowy entity.

Turner was briefing Secretary of State Cyrus R. Vance on the finding late on July 19 when they were confronted by ABC Television's inquiries.

Diplomatic correspondent Ted Koppel was informed that a "command structure" adequate for a brigade had been confirmed, but the charge of a brigade itself was rejected.

The next day Koppel broadcast a report attributed to undisclosed congressional sources that "a brigade of Soviet troops, possibly as many as 6,000 combat-ready men, has been moved into Cuba within recent weeks." He noted the administration denials.